

# Eros and Civilization: Sexuality and the Contemporary International Art Cinema

By Frank P. Tomasulo

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*In our age of globalization*, it is often assumed that the distinctive thematic and aesthetic concerns of major international film auteurs may be homogenized and/or sublated into some sort of 'universal' form of expression, apart from the national identity and localized cinematic traditions from which they derive. In such an era, nationwide and regional customs and practices, including erotic mores, might also become 'homogenized' under the regime of an intercontinental cinematic style. The lures of





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the worldwide box office and global prestige are two other factors that might lead to a one-size-fits-all mentality for contemporary film-makers.

It is therefore important to keep in mind that the question of national cinema and national identity – what Siegfried Kracauer called ‘national character’ in reference to Weimar Germany (Kracauer 1947: 8) – must always be studied in the context of larger global, historical and artistic determinants. In particular, the role of the erotic impulse in a given civilization’s character and cinema must likewise be investigated within a broader system of custom and representation. For example, are there international erotic practices that transcend national boundaries and beliefs? If Eskimos kiss with their noses, as the popular myth goes, what does it mean if a French couple does the same? More important to this discussion, what does it mean if that French couple kisses with their noses on screen? If devotees of certain religions expect

their women (and occasionally their men) to be modest in dress and demeanour (at least in public), what does that say about a culture’s erotica?

One way to investigate these complex sexual phenomena is through an examination of international co-productions, particularly ‘port-manteau’ or ‘anthology’ films, what the French call *films à sketch*, which suture together the directorial efforts of ‘star’ film-makers from different countries around a common theme: love in the city, the Vietnam War, 9/11, etc. This ‘quasi-genre’, if it can be called that, has a long and mixed history that flourished most noticeably in the European art cinema of the 1960s: *Love at Twenty/L’Amour à vingt ans* (1962), *The Seven Deadly Sins/Les Sept pêchés capitaux* (1962), *Far from Vietnam/Loin de Viet Nam* (1967) and *Spirits of the Dead* (1968), to name just a few.

In particular, *Eros* (2004), a cosmopolitan omnibus film directed by Wong Kar-Wai, Steven Soderbergh and Michelangelo Anto-



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nioni respectively, can be interrogated for traces of distinct national themes and semi-otic styles, as well as more globalized concerns that pertain to sexuality in our times. The idea is to suggest the complex nature of defining a specific constellation of films as a national cinema in an age of both the cultural specificity of the nation state (and semi-autonomous regions) and the worldwide amalgamation of such cultural formations under globalization. Is there an international modernist style of cinema (as there was, for instance, in architecture), or do Hong Kong, American and Italian auteurs make very different movies? Likewise, is there an international style of sexuality, or does each nation – and every film-maker – have a unique way of representing contemporary Eros?

Some background information: *Eros* was assembled with the express purpose of being a tribute to the career of the now-deceased co-director and cinematic maestro Michelangelo Antonioni by auteurs who have been influenced by his reinvention of film eroticism and his distinctive cinematic style. Antonioni’s depictions of the sexual malaise of the 1960s were clearly congruent with the views of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, whose books were largely responsible for the 1960s (and 1990s) vogue of ‘identity’. Erikson noted that ‘the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under sexual inhibitions which prevented him from [attaining his identity]’ (Erikson 1963: 279). By contrast, the contemporary patient was constrained not by sexual repression but, according to Christopher Lasch,

by narcissism (Lasch 1979). Overtly charming and successful, he/she is socially and sexually promiscuous as a way of avoiding close involvements. As a result, compulsive copulation becomes perfunctory and sterile: no longer a blissful pleasure shared by two (or more) people; rather, sex had become a self-indulgence for solitary monads.

Herbert Marcuse offered a similar diagnosis. He pointed out that images of sexual gratification that had such an explosive negative force in Victorian society have been harnessed – in a post-industrial *société de consommation* that no longer needs the social cement of sexual taboo – to the service of the status quo and consumerism (after all, ‘sex sells’). Marcuse called this modern phenomenon ‘repressive desublimation’ (Marcuse 1964: 72–79). In line with Erikson, Lasch and Marcuse, Antonioni’s clinical cinema was often interested less in the personal psychology of love and sexuality than in the social *phenomenology* of contemporary erotic behaviour.

These same issues are part and parcel of the cinematic world of *Eros*, particularly the three directors’ portrayal of the ‘sexual crisis’ of the modern libidinal apparatus (Leprohon 1972: 168). And, indeed, in very different ways and in different historical periods, Wong, Soderbergh and Antonioni all address facets of the ongoing global dialectics of sex.

Originally, Pedro Almodovar was to have been one of the three film-makers, along with Wong Kar-wai and Antonioni himself, but his schedule would not permit it so Steven Soderbergh was substituted. *Eros* was a co-production of Fandango Films, Section Eight Ltd. and Solaris Cinematografica, and was one of the first movies to be distributed under the banner of Warner Brothers’ nascent art-house division, Warner Independent Pictures. It grossed a very anaemic \$188,000 in the United States.

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### ‘The Hand’

The first part of this trilogy – or should it be called a *ménage-à-trois*? – is ‘The Hand/Shǒu/手’, directed by Wong Kar-Wai. As usual, the director’s perennial themes of time, love and loss are on display, all within the context of the evolving socio-political context of his native Hong

Kong, a British colony in the time frame of the film. In particular, ‘The Hand’ is a nocturnal chamber piece about the unrequited love of an apprentice tailor for his most-treasured client, Miss Hua (Gong Li), a stylish Hong Kong courtesan of the mid-1960s, a period when ancient traditions gave way to modernist sensibilities, particularly in the arena of sex. Over the course of many years, the timid but besotted tailor, Xiao Zhang (Chang Chen), lovingly crafts the clothing that this sophisticated yet unattainable woman wears for other men.

From the opening image, the director creates a milieu of loud, heavy rain, long empty hallways and silk sheath dresses – a veritable filmic phenomenology of romantic places, textures and tapestries. Indeed, the first shot portrays a *Rashomon*-like rainstorm that engulfs the shabby Palace Hotel and surrounding waterfront neighbourhood in which Miss Hua now lives. Inside Miss Hua’s room, however, it is quiet. She asks Zhang to remember when they first met and that triggers the flashback that is most of the rest of the film.

We first see an empty stairwell in a fashionable apartment building – an obvious homage to Antonioni’s concern with architectural spaces – as the shy tailor asks for directions to Apartment #1, Miss Hua’s abode. The courtesan keeps the virginal tailor waiting at this first meeting while she pants loudly off-screen in the course of servicing a wealthy customer in the next room. Zhang puts his hand on his forehead in a subtle gesture of embarrassment. When she finally deigns to summon him into her bedroom, the camera holds on the décor of the waiting room well after Zhang leaves the room, another tribute to Antonioni.

Once in her domain, Miss Hua tells Zhang that he cannot understand how to dress a woman without some sexual experience. So, she orders him to take off his trousers and underpants and then initiates him into the world of the erotic by hand. She then dismisses him abruptly with an injunction, ‘Remember this feeling ... and you’ll make me beautiful clothes.’

Although the shots of her bright-red polished fingernails against the back of Zhang’s upper thighs can be construed as erotic in a





detached kind of way, this is not a particularly explicit sequence; indeed, its restraint is apparent, given the more overt forms of sexuality that have dominated international screens in recent decades. Even when the woman caresses his ass and testicles (causing him to wince), the camera focuses on Zhang's face. Wong seems to take more delight in the sublime subtlety of his shimmering, highly composed romantic images and subtle editing rhythms (along with the accompanying elegant classical string music) than in the actual depiction of this (pardon my language) hand job. Again, Zhang is embarrassed, on the verge of tears, even at the moment of climax. That event is shot in tight close-up on his face for over forty seconds and then we cut to her reaction shot and, finally, the eggplant-coloured walls.

In fact, throughout 'The Hand', Wong seems to fetishize elegant clothing, décor (curtains, lamps, eggplant-coloured walls, flowers and vases), and languid camera movements – mainly through highly composed shots that are held on-screen much longer than necessary to make their narrative points, but that allow the spectator to contemplate the thematic relevance of the ravishing imagery, a technique often used by Antonioni in his heyday.

The vacant stairwell of Miss Hua's building, seen throughout Wong's segment, immediately follows the hand-job scene – a visual correlative for the ultimate emptiness of the experience, one that is worthy of Antonioni's editing and use of 'dead space' in films from *The Adventure/L'Avventura* (1960) to *Identification of a Woman/Identificazione di una donna* (1982). Although this *mise-en-scène* of purposelessness conveys the alienation of the dispassionate act, Zhang immediately falls

in love for life with his sexual mentor. He expresses this affection mainly through the beautiful gowns and colourful dresses he makes for her over the ensuing decades.

In addition to empty architectural spaces, Wong also uses barrier images, also associated with Antonioni's cinema, to emphasize the alienation between characters or to visually hem in a person by constricting his/her space. In one shot, the tailor is seen in his shop, working on Miss Hua's gowns, visually and emotionally confined by his wistful, unspoken and exclusive yearning for an unresponsive woman and by his devotion to a trade he chose in order to stay in touch with her. Again, Zhang's dormant sexuality is conveyed visually – and through the actor's subtle, poker-faced expressions that ambiguously portray his latent male masochism. Antonioni once referred to *Eclipse/L'Eclisse* (1962) as 'a story of imprisoned sentiments' (Gilman 1962: 10), and Wong Kar-Wai follows in that tradition. Both his characters are trapped – literally and figuratively – in their respective situations. Barricades, fences and architectural structures visually foreground their predicaments throughout 'The Hand'.

Furthermore, Wong uses subtle gestural codes of performance, à la Antonioni, to convey character. At one point, we see Zhang in his workshop, tailoring one of Miss Hua's dresses. In a subtle sign of his love, he caresses the lining of her garment, a move accentuated by Wong's use of slow motion. His love thrives despite sexual denial.

Later, towards the end, both the tailor and Miss Hua look downwards; both are humbled and embarrassed by her distressed financial situation and his need to collect her bill. Both have 'lost face' and hence subtly bow their heads in mutual shame. Another example of

this restrained acting style is the use of Zhang's eponymous hand later in the film: instead of taking Miss Hua's measurements with a tape, he runs his palm slowly along her shoulders, arm, and waist. Eventually their hands clasp in longing and their bodies sway. The kinaesthesia of their erotic desire is thus embodied in their delicate hand movements and in the swelling romantic music on the soundtrack.

In the end, the now sickly prostitute, her beauty long faded and her wealthy clientele dispersed, is forced to walk the waterfront streets and live in the dilapidated (and ironically named) Palace Hotel. We even see her having noisy sex with a client on a rickety bed, as Zhang waits outside overhearing her loud panting – just as he did on their first acquaintance in her elegant apartment. The difference in her circumstances is clearly apparent. Until this point, Miss Hua had been depicted as being an acquisitive and heartless serial seducer, an entrepreneur who conducted a soulless 'cash-and-carry' business. She had flirted with other men on the telephone in Zhang's presence and ignored him repeatedly, notwithstanding his obvious devotion to her. Now she does not even try to flirt with her anonymous client, who thumps away on top of her as her cheap hotel bed creaks with every thrust. We do not even see the customer's face or body, and Miss Hua hardly acknowledges him. What we do see is Zhang's impassive face as he waits in the hotel hallway for his true love to finish up.

Despite those long years of inattention, the now-successful tailor remains in thrall to Miss Hua's vanished charms and decides to pay her rent. In fact, when they have a rendezvous after several years apart, he asks her to find him a wife and she replies, 'What about me? You think I'm not good enough?!' They jokingly agree to marry, even though they both know that she is dying. After all those years of longing and loneliness, the tailor finds a way to reawaken her sexuality in much the same way that she did for him so many years before. She again masturbates him, this time in an act of devotion to his loyalty and as an expression of what Antonioni once called 'mutual pity' (Antonioni 1969: 223). The emphasis is again on her hand and on his impassive face. What emotion there is in this scene is carried by the music,



particularly the strings that well up romantically over this tender yet melancholy act.

Because she has a contagious malady (presumably a sexually transmitted disease), the dying woman does not allow Zhang to kiss her on the lips but he caresses her face and kisses her cheek and hand. Then the camera glides along some hallways and holds on a deep-focus shot of an empty hallway with a noticeable vanishing point and a closed door at the end of the corridor. A thin streak of light runs down the hall. This cut-away to a vacant site again suggests the emptiness and meaninglessness of the limited eroticism between these two unrequited lovers, the wasted time and cruel rebuffs she engaged in during their prime. The repetition of this kind of image, as well as the repeated shots of the tailor sewing clothes in a restricted space, suggest the Freudian repetition compulsion that became Zhang's lot in life.

Finally, Miss Hua dies off-screen; unbridled sex kills her, while unrequited love enables him to survive. The tailor is left only with his memories and his aching pathos. He stares into space in close-up, poker-faced, as a lively tune is heard on the soundtrack: a fusion of Asian and American beats. This ironic and contrapuntal use of background music portrays both the pain and passion of love and Eros; the mixed musical nationalities suggest a universality to the story and theme: that 'love makes the world go 'round' but 'you can't always get what you want'.

For most of the film, Zhang and Miss Hua have hardly touched each other, proving that 'abstinence makes the heart grow fonder'. Rather than express the joy and *jouissance* of modern Eros, 'The Hand' portrays the heartache and disillusionment of unrequited love. If these seem like simplistic themes to hang

a film on, realize that, following Antonioni, Wong War-Kei conveys those minimalist themes through a minimalist, modernist and melancholy narrative and cinematic style. And, in modernism, less is always more.

## 'Equilibrium'

In Steven Soderbergh's chapter, 'Equilibrium', however, less is less. Not much more than a light-hearted (and light-headed) one-note sketch or doodle, 'Equilibrium' mainly consists of a psychiatric session between a neurotic patient, Nick Penrose (Robert Downey, Jr.), a stressed-out advertising executive, and a neurotic shrink, Dr Pearl (Alan Arkin). The ostensible subject of this banal skit is a recurring sex dream that haunts the analysand, but the dream itself is not terribly sexy and neither is the rest of the film. In fact, while frenetic Nick free associates on the couch, the analyst is strangely distracted and pays little attention to his patient's 'talking cure'. The episode is set in 1950s Manhattan and is shot in black and white to replicate film noir. Tito Puente Latin jazz background music accentuates the light tone of the piece.

The film opens on the ad man's dream, which takes place in a hotel room and involves a naked woman (Ele Keats) – a total stranger – who wakes up in bed with him, bathes in front of him, gets dressed and then leaves. The contrast between her curly, vivid red hair and her deep-blue outfit, with matching hat, is furthered by the hatchet lighting that bisects the woman's face. The floating camera sways back and forth, providing more life and eroticism than the nude woman. This dreamscape is shot through a limpid blue filter, perhaps to distinguish it from the noirish monochrome of the 'real' scenes in the therapist's office.

In those scenes, Venetian blinds create heavy striped lighting patterns throughout Dr Pearl's consulting room. Nick delivers a monologue about a man's toupee and how it should not be a topic of conversation: 'The senseless tragedy of Hal's hair'. As the camera pulls way back, we see Dr Pearl seated on a couch in the foreground, taking notes and smoking a cigarette. Even though indoors, the psychiatrist wears a fedora and a trench coat,



immediately challenging both his credentials and his sanity. Although Pearl initially feigns some interest in Nick's recurring dream (which the patient insists is 'not a sex dream ... exactly'), he spends most of his time ignoring his client while sneaking around the office, searching for and then peering through high-powered binoculars. The doctor's voyeuristic 'male gaze' focuses on a woman in a nearby building, like James Stewart in *Rear Window* (1954). Thus, both these protagonists would rather be elsewhere and their erotic thoughts and desires seem to be in different places.

Out of the blue, nervous Nick has an epiphany and serendipitously discovers the idea for the snooze button on alarm clocks, thus relieving his career stress. Nonetheless, his bluish 'nightmare' continues to haunt him. We watch the dream again as Nick begins to narrate and free associate: 'I watch her as she gets dressed...' During all this, Dr Pearl is extremely blasé and hardly responds, limiting much of his commentary to 'Uh huh'. As his patient prattles on, the eccentric shrink folds up his case files and converts them into paper airplanes. In a gesture that seems to have great meaning, the good doctor tosses a paper airplane out the window and gestures



to someone across the way. Both Nick and Dr Pearl seem to have some screws loose.

At the end of the session, the shrink states that they have accomplished something; in actuality, nothing happened. This segment of *Eros* may be a spoof of psychoanalysis and/or the overemphasis on sex in dream analysis or in American culture as a whole. Although the psychiatric session appears to be over, Nick falls asleep and the analyst leaves the room. Then we see Nick's recurring dream depicted again. This time, it starts in a blue bedroom and moves to the bathroom as the redhead gets into the tub; eventually she puts on her nylons and hat, and grabs a matching blue purse. A hard cut shows an alarm clock that seems to wake up Nick. Did the dream come to him in the doctor's office, where we last saw him, or in his own bedroom (where his wife now accosts him: 'Nick, are you up?')? Could it be that the entire film was the depiction of a dream, including the nude woman, the therapy session and the paper airplanes?

A more important question is, what is the point of this inconsequential farce, especially when the whole thing seems to turn out to be – surprise, surprise – a dream? Unlike Nick's fantasy figure, Mrs Penrose wears an odd hat and black gloves. Perhaps the ad man's recurring dream is a simple wish-fulfilment, as Freud claimed all dreams were, a reverie of a sexy stranger instead of the reality of his regular bedmate. Another possibility is that Nick Penrose's predicament is supposed to be representative of the workplace anxieties and coping mechanisms of the post-war 'organization man', a concept first articulated by William H. Whyte in 1956 (Whyte 1956: 1–23). In either case, 'Equilibrium' tells us nothing new about modern male eroticism, or even American sexuality circa 1956; instead, Soderbergh's film suggests



that our fantasies and daydreams are more erotic than our humdrum lives, a commonplace of both pop psychology and modern corporate advertising. Furthermore, the film situates the erotic fantasy in the body of a (naked) woman, a potentially sexist inscription and objectification that essentializes the female gender and appeals in a chauvinistic way to the male gaze of both the film-maker and the spectator.

'Equilibrium' ends on a coda of ten or more shots of paper airplanes flying out of windows and gliding through the sky. This slow montage supports the idea of fantasy, and it is augmented by the low-angle 'Dutch-tilt' canted camera angles used to show the 'planes' in flight. Although this closing sequence may have been Soderbergh's left-handed tribute to Antonioni's often-employed theme of ambiguity, the Italian film-maker was never an advocate of unbridled cinematic chaos. The 'anything goes' aesthetic used here, perhaps in the interest of humour, satire or spoof, is actually in sharp contrast to Antonioni's more rigorous and precise modernist style, and in direct contradiction to his views on contemporary *Eros*. Clearly, Soderbergh's segment demonstrates that something is indeed wrong with the human erotic impulse – in both analyst *and* analysand – but the specific social diagnosis is so diffuse and undifferentiated that the problem could be interpreted as the stress of the post-war workplace, the general milieu of America in the 1950s, modern marriage and/or psychoanalysis itself.



### 'The Dangerous Thread of Things'

The final instalment of *Eros* is Antonioni's 'The Dangerous Thread of Things'/'Il Filo



pericoloso delle cose'. In his dotage, Antonioni seemed to have drawn on his earlier, 1960s diagnosis of the *malattia dei sentimenti*, the 'Sick Eros' (Hamilton 1969: 40) of Marcusean one-dimensional men (and women), and moved beyond it to an acceptance of a more open spirit of sexual *joie de vivre*. As in most of his other films, the characters are rapid representatives of an haute-bourgeois class that (in this case) drives Maserati sports cars, drinks expensive liquor and sunbathes in the nude, but experiences little joy in sex, or anything else for that matter. In short, they suffer from that dread existential malady: 'Antoniennui' (Sarris 1970: 189).

Antonioni's earlier films frequently foregrounded such a despairing view of life and, especially, moribund erotic relations. The film-maker often posited couples whose basic unhappiness evinced a fierce opposition both to the institution of marriage as bourgeois society's sanctified disavowal of desire and to the 'let-it-all-hang-out' Zeitgeist of the New Consciousness. Modern sexuality is thus depicted as a complex symptom of the fundamental estrangement of contemporary civilization. Relationships are shown as temporary arrangements, like the modern buildings Sandro designs in *The Adventure* or the building under construction at the end of *Eclipse*.

Indeed, the first image of 'Dangerous Thread' is an establishing shot of what appears to be a house but which turns out to be a tent-like structure surrounded by trees and lawn chairs. This impermanent edifice serves as an apt metaphor for Antonioni's views on modern sexuality. In one sense, this insubstantial building is an uncompleted social arrangement; as such, it foreshadows the temporary nature of erotic relationships in 'The Dangerous Thread'. On a larger level, this flimsy shell could be seen as the director's synecdoche for modern Eros, for what Robert Kolker has called 'desiccated love' (Kolker 1983: 142).

The forty-something couple here wallow in their affluence and intellectual disenchantment as they idle about and wander through an idyllic paradise on the coast of Tuscany. Cloe (Regina Nemni), for instance, is introduced laying on a lawn chair wearing only a black thong and listening to a significant tune on the radio: 'Change, change, change ... You're lost!' Her



American lover/husband, Christopher (Christopher Buchholz), intrudes and urges her to turn off the radio: 'Why do we have to pollute the air with all these empty words?!' She retorts, 'You're the one who's talking.' This brief, pretentious interchange sets the stage for their persistent marital discontent. It continues as Cloe puts on a red see-through mesh blouse and a long maroon-red couturier skirt, a restrictive costume that suggests her frigidity and trapped sexuality. In fact, she states her (post-Lacanian) goal directly: 'I try to stay away from Desire.' Then, she bluntly demands that he 'admit that it's over'. Later, her cutting commentary reaches its apogee as they walk under a shaded canopy of trees: 'Don't talk to me like that, asshole!' Even though the trees' branches meet in a natural, heliotropic 'embrace', the 'civilized' human beings squabble. Their unremitting animosity towards each other makes them oblivious to the sensuous beauty all around them.

The constant bickering between this sexpot Italian beauty – who wears designer clothes and hikes around the countryside wearing stiletto heels – and her American husband/boyfriend – with his blue Maserati convertible – illustrates the Sick Eros of a commodity culture that offers little but consumer goods to bring joy to humanity. As their relationship disintegrates, the 'lovers' ignore the ecological beauty of the landscape (lush green meadows and woods, tranquil lagoons, picturesque waterfalls, ocean views, empty beaches) and thus enunciate Antonioni's recurring theme of Nature vs Civilization (Tomasulo 1986: 205–06). In fact, their marital quarrel is encapsulated in an arch line of Cloe's dialogue directed at Christopher: 'Normally I love this place, but because you're here I find it depressing.' This couple

fall out of love because of the wife's lack of fervour for her man, a stagnant situation that is expressed metaphorically through their last point of contact: a swampy, muddy lake.

Eventually, the man meets a new woman – a well-endowed lady who has a penchant for horses and nudity, and is often seen under waterfalls (with a bevy of other nude nymphs), and on deserted beaches, or against the lush backdrop of a deep-focus landscape – and Nature comes to the fore, and with it, natural sexuality. Although Cloe is incapable of satisfying her partner, apparently Christopher's latest *amore* can. Thus, a brief triangle is born, one that features a rather explicit sex scene between Christopher and this care-free new woman, Linda (Luisa Ranieri), in her crumbling medieval castle-like home in the forest. When they first enter the house, the dialogue becomes psycho-babbly when Linda says, 'I hope you like my chaos.'

In contrast to Cloe's reddish designer outfits, the autumnal red-haired Linda wears an ordinary light-blue tank top and blue jeans. This cool-coloured outfit is in line with her initial teasing, hard-to-get demeanour but she eventually removes her clothes (except for a flesh-coloured thong) and masturbates while standing on her bed. At this point, Christopher's sexual arousal is portrayed by a symbolic object: a weathervane shaped like a gamecock, which he glances at forlornly. Shortly thereafter, he mounts the symbolic circular staircase to Linda's bedroom and proceeds to have sex with her. During their intercourse, she giggles while a singer croons numerals on the soundtrack (sex 'by the numbers'? ). Only then does the woman reveal her name: 'My name is Linda.' The man leaves but does not give his name to her. This 'zipless sex' (Jong 1973: 11–12) is a mainstay of Antonioni's entire oeuvre; couples frequently engage in intimate behaviour but without sharing their names – or their feelings. (Think of the nameless photographer and his first sex-mate in *Blow Up* (1966) or the nameless Girl in *The Passenger/Professione: reporter* (1975).)

Antonioni frequently provides such 'cold showers' for his characters and viewers. In particular, his detached, almost clinical, *mise-en-scène*, editing and soundtrack articulations

during actual love scenes and during symbolic sex sequences create the exact opposite effect of Hollywood cinema's lyrical romantic imagery and music. These distanciation devices make it difficult for audiences to identify emotionally with Antonioni's characters; instead, the spectator views them from the outside. Indeed, in the next scene of 'Dangerous Thread', we see horses running wild with the wind while sticking together, enjoying the natural camaraderie of their species; the humans always separate.

In the final sequence of 'The Dangerous Thread of Things', Linda dances nude on the beach, twirling a stick around as she pirouettes around the shoreline. As she sprawls out on the sand in an overhead shot, a clothed woman approaches: it is Cloe. She holds her arms apart in a Christ-like pose and takes in the beauty of the beach and of the naked woman beside her. Linda then continues her nude dance at the shore, to the accompaniment of swelling music and song – and the sound of the swelling tide. She is part of Nature, as is her sexuality. Now naked herself, Cloe comes up to and casts her shadow over the now-reclining Linda.

Antonioni often uses the sexiopolitics of narrative space in precisely this subtle manner to convey the idea of dominance and submission in erotic matters. Like most of Antonioni's subtle 'open' endings, no words are spoken yet the moment is charged with meaning (Tomasulo 1986: 200–35). The dramatic situation (the triangle) remains unresolved, as does the state of modern Eros. And the director uses the sexiopolitics of the image to convey that ambiguous idea.

Whereas in 'The Hand', Wong Kar-Wei frequently utilized the close-up – or the masked-off medium shot – to provoke identification with his two unrequited lovers in their two sex scenes, Antonioni (true to form) uses the long shot in 'The Dangerous Thread' to keep the spectator at an aesthetic and emotional distance from his listless, unsympathetic characters. The sole exception, although still seen in long shot, is the concluding image of Cloe and Linda, who meet in a chance encounter on the beach. In sharp contradiction to the classical Hollywood paradigm, whose sexual regime generally involves a narrative trajectory toward heterosexual

marriage as a closural device, this concluding scene, with its nudity, lovely beach and stirring musical accompaniment, subtly suggests that Cloe's repressed sexuality may have been reawakened and that two women might bond and achieve some measure of natural bliss – outside the domain of patriarchal domination and compulsory heterosexuality.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, it might be instructive to point out that, despite its title and twenty-first-century release date, only two of the films in *Eros* feature full frontal nudity (the 'full monty' as they say in Britain) – the Soderbergh and the Antonioni. In both cases, it is soft-core female nudity on display. Does this imply that, internationally, women are still more often associated with sexuality than men? Or that global box office and commercial viability still rely on the male gaze and male spectators, no matter what country the film represents? Could it be that decades after the worldwide second wave of feminism (and the growth of feminist film theory) that cinema still relies on the fetishization of the female body through the agency of the male gaze and scopophilia? Alternatively, could these images of female nudity suggest that women are more natural than men, more in touch with their inherent sexuality? Is that the state of world cinema in a globalized economy? Is that the state of international *Eros* – if there is such a thing? These questions require further research, not only with reference to *Eros* but in terms of the whole arena of global film production.

What we can glean from all three episodes of *Eros* is a view of contemporary global civilization caught in an interregnum, a transition phase between an old, outdated morality with puritanical strictures and a new consciousness that seems to promote free love but is fettered by post-industrial capitalism's spirit of competition and acquisitiveness. This new morality conspires to diminish our humanness and reduce our free response to the transcendental pleasures of love and true *Eros*. As Antonioni once put it, 'Even though we know that the ancient codes of morality are decrepit and no longer tenable, we persist ... in remaining loyal to them' (Antonioni 1969: 223).



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All three films in *Eros* foreground just such a despairing view of erotic relations. The trio of film-makers posit couples whose basic unhappiness evinces a fierce opposition both to the institution of marriage as bourgeois society's sanctified disavowal of desire and to the 'let-it-all-hang-out' Zeitgeist of a post-modernist epoch. Modern sexuality is thus depicted as a complex symptom of the fundamental estrangement of contemporary life. Within the rapidly changing social milieu of the latest *fin de siècle*, *Eros* chronicles men and women's growing independence from conventional sex roles and how both genders remain frustrated by their lovers and by the system of patriarchal capitalism that devalues their personhood. As such, this film is a social possession that both reflects its era and reveals much about the shifting and cheerless state of international *Eros* even today. •

### Contributor's details

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